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Public Libraries and Access to Information in Plateau State, Nigeria

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Introduction

Rural inhabitants in the context of this research refer to people living in the core Nigerian rural areas and have very little or no level of education. They are people whose lifestyles are characterized by extreme poverty and illiteracy. Plateau State is the twelfth largest state of Nigeria, and it is roughly located in the center of the country. Its capital is Jos and it is celebrated as “The Home of Peace and Tourism”. It has a population of around 3.5 million people (<http://www.plateaustate.gov.ng/page/at-a-glance>, 2015). The state comprises three geo-political zones: Plateau North, Plateau Central and Plateau South. PLSLB is a public (State) library with the head office in Jos and two outreach libraries in the other two geo-political zones: Pankshin (central zone) and Shendam (southern zone) of Plateau State, Nigeria. Successful sustainable development in developing countries like Nigeria and states like Plateau depends on the level of commitments by governments and other stakeholders to providing the rural populace with valuable information that are relevant to their specific information needs, empowering them to understand, use and share such information, for the purpose of problem solving and better decision making. Beyond access (2014) attested to this fact when it described information as vital to every development outcome — everything from health to agriculture to supporting open government.

A lot has been said and done about access to information at global and regional levels. For instance, IFLA has made many great efforts towards promoting increased access to information. In February 2015 in New York, IFLA presented the Lyon Declaration on Access to Information and Development to the United Nations (UN). The Lyon Declaration calls upon UN Member States to recognize the importance of increased access to information in supporting the post-2015 development agenda (*IFLA takes Lyon Declaration to the UN*, 2015). Despite all efforts made for increased access to information, the impact of the access to information advocacy is yet to be noticed among the Nigerian rural inhabitants because the real rural inhabitants are yet to be reached. For Africa in general and Nigeria in particular to achieve sustainable development, the real rural inhabitants must be increasingly empowered with good information. Therefore, this study intends to identify the information services rendered by PLSLB to the rural inhabitants in Plateau State, Nigeria, the perception of the rural inhabitants about Plateau State Libraries, the impact of the information services offered on the rural inhabitants, the challenges faced by PLSLB and suggested ways out.

Statement of the Problem

A library is supposed to serve all categories of people, old or young, men or women, educated or illiterate, physically challenged or not and so on. However, this is not always the case especially in developing countries like Nigeria, because of the general wrong perception that libraries are meant for only the educated. This is why it is very rare to see rural people use the library and this cannot also be separated from the fact that rural libraries are not available in most rural communities in Nigeria and where there are, the rural inhabitants cannot access the information being provided by these libraries because the information are not tailored to their information needs. PLSLB has only two outreach libraries in the entire Plateau State. The question then is; does each of these libraries really meet the information needs of the real rural inhabitants in its entire zone? It is on this note that this study uncovers the status quo at the PLSLB as regard the cause of access to information by rural inhabitants in Plateau State, Nigeria.

Objective of the Study

The study aimed to examine various information services for Plateau State rural inhabitants by the PLSLB, Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

- (i) identify information services by PLSLB for rural inhabitants;
- (ii) find out the perception of the rural inhabitants about PLSLB;
- (iii) identify how PLSLB information services have impacted the rural inhabitants;
- (iv) identify the challenges hampering PLSLB information services to the rural inhabitants; and
- (v) identify the possible ways out of the identified challenges.

Research Questions

In order to realize the stated objectives, the following research questions were positioned:

- (i) What types of information services does PLSLB provide to rural inhabitants in Plateau State?
- (ii) How do rural inhabitants perceive PLSLB?
- (iii) How has PLSLB information services impacted the rural inhabitants?
- (iv) What challenges impede the services of PLSLB to the rural inhabitants?
- (v) What are the possible ways out of the identified challenges?

Literature Review

The living standard of an average rural inhabitant in a developing country like Nigeria can be described as poor. Poverty is usually believed to be characterized by poor living condition and illiteracy. However, there is another form of poverty that is seldom mentioned and that is, *information poverty* (IFLA takes Lyon Declaration to the UN, 2015). Until it is generally agreed that lack of access to information is poverty in itself and all information stakeholders cooperate to

eradicate it from the society, there can be no meaningful sustainable development. Libraries have a leading role to play in the cause for information poverty eradication and for this to be achieved, fruitful efforts must be made to reach the real rural inhabitants, to make useful and understandable information accessible to them.

Dent and Yannotta (2005) suggested three functions of the rural library to be: provision of information to those individuals responsible for rural development programs; supporting rural education programmes and rural schools, and serving as centers for community education and culture. Thus, access to information by rural inhabitants fall within the third function of a rural library serving as a center for community education and culture. Hence, rural library and information centres should conduct needs assessment so as to model their services towards the needs of their community (Anunobi et al., n. d.).

While considering the conduct of needs assessment of rural dwellers for information services modelling, it is also essential to explore the perception of public libraries by rural people. Getting a glimpse of how rural inhabitants perceive the library will help libraries and policy makers in their future library and information services modelling. Shaifuddin et al., (2011) asserted that the perception of the rural library by rural youths should be of primary importance to the profession. This assertion concurs with the opinion of (Omopupa, 2006) who noted that the concept of a library to an average rural dweller in Nigeria is foreign, due to high levels of illiteracy, non-adaptability of library services to local environment needs, and poor library services in the few rural settings where they do exist. Jia (2000) noted that the farmers in Jiangsu Province and Sichuan Province of China perceive rural library as an important place for the rural populace to acquire basic education, obtain information on agricultural production techniques and enrich their standard of living.

Public libraries could have a noticeable impact on the rural inhabitants if they are accustomed to their various categories of information needs and are also able to tailor the libraries' services to meeting these needs. (Abolaji, 2009) discovered that non-literate rural dwellers can make effective use of a sophisticated institution like the library, when it is tailored to their own structure of information demand. However, public libraries in Nigeria have not been able to make tangible impact on the rural dwellers due to various challenges. Ebiwolate (2010) asserted that library services are inhibited by poor infrastructure, inadequate funding, lack of human resources, lack of political will and so on. Therefore, for public libraries in Nigeria to make noticeable impact on the rural society, they need to

be empowered to overcome the challenges that presently impede their services to the rural inhabitants. In view of this, Ebiwolate (2010) recommended adequate funding for public libraries and continuous training in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and related areas for library staff.

Methodology

The study adopted qualitative research design and a case study research method. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussion and inspection of PLSLB facilities at the head office and the two outreach libraries. Seven members of staff of the PLSLB Head Office in Jos, three members of staff of the PLSLB outreach office in Pankshin and eight rural inhabitants were interviewed. In all, there were eighteen respondents. The sample size is considered suitable for a qualitative research of this nature. The focus group discussion session for the rural inhabitants was conducted in English language but there was interpretation to Hausa Language, which is the general local language spoken in the Northern region of Nigeria. The interview sessions were recorded, transcribed and manually analyzed by categorization of ideas and concepts, collapse of responses and various categories under main over-arching themes. Findings were validated using triangulation from different sources (O'Connor & Gibson, 2003).

Findings

Demographic Data

There were eighteen respondents in all, comprising seven PLSLB Head Office staff, three outreach library staff and eight rural inhabitants. The eight rural inhabitants aged between 25 and 60 do one of farming, tailoring, carpentry and petty trading.

RQ1. What types of information services does PLSLB provide to rural inhabitants in Plateau State?

Library staff at both the PLSLB Head Office and PLSLB Outreach Library, Pankshin, and the rural inhabitants were interviewed. From the focus group discussions, interview and inspection of PLSLB facilities at the head office and the two outreach libraries, it was discovered that **PLSLB does not provide any direct information services to the rural inhabitants:**

Respondent 1 [PLSLB Head Office]: “The Board has not been able to reach the grass root because of so many challenges and with all these challenges, how do we work?”

Respondent 1 [PLSLB Outreach Library, Pankshin Staff]: “No! We have never done that. The challenges are from the government. They have not done anything.”

All Respondents [Pankshin rural inhabitants]: “Nothing like that.”

RQ2. How do rural inhabitants perceive PLSLB?

Rural inhabitants were asked questions about their perception of PLSLB Outreach Library, Pankshin. From the responses, it was clear they do not have positive perceptions of the library:

Respondent 4: “Nothing! If you look around, you will see that the place is looking very old and dilapidated.”

Respondent 8: “There is nothing the library is doing for us, rural people. Only a few students who are preparing for exams do come here to read. We have passed that level. We can no longer go to school but we need assistance in other areas.”

RQ3. How has PLSLB information services impacted the rural inhabitants?

All respondents submitted that since PLSLB has not been able to provide relevant information services to the real rural inhabitants, it has consequently failed to have a noticeable positive impact on them:

Respondent 2 [PLSLB Head Office]: “Ha! How can we have direct impact on them when we do not have anything to offer them?”

Respondent 1 [PLSLB Outreach Library, Pankshin]: “Well, like I said, the library provides no direct information services to the rural people. So, I cannot say, particularly any impact it has got on the people [real rural inhabitants].”

RQ4. What challenges impede the services of PLSLB to the rural inhabitants?

The failure of PLSLB and its outreach libraries to make relevant information accessible to the rural inhabitants was attributed to some challenges: negligence on the part of the government, non-approval of budget, non-implementation of budget (where it is approved) which generally result in lack of funds, extremely dilapidated facilities, obsolete resources and shortage of staff.

RQ5. What are the possible ways out of the identified challenges?

Some suggestions were made by the respondents as possible ways out of the identified challenges: calls to government for timely approval and release of budgets, passionate calls to organizations (private, public and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)) and the international community for assistance. There was also call for accountability and transparency on the part of the Management of PLSLB.

Discussion

A library is supposed to meet the information needs of all categories of people in its environment: handicapped or physically fit, young or old, literate or illiterate. On the contrary, PLSLB has not been able to deliver its responsibilities in empowering with access to information, the rural inhabitants of the State, as expected of an ideal public library. This dissatisfaction has been blamed on various challenges that the Board has to cope with. The study revealed that other than only a very few youths who come to the libraries to read, the Library Board and its outreaches do not provide any relevant information services to the real rural inhabitants. The respondents blamed the State Government for the Board's predicament. This is in line with Ebiwolate (2010) who noted "lack of political will" as one of the factors that inhibit public library services.

Moreover, the study showed that the rural people do not have any positive perception of the library. They claimed that the library does nothing for them. Their responses showed that they do not know the importance of the library in their everyday information needs. This concurs with (Omopupa, 2006) who noted that the concept of a library to an average dweller in Nigeria is foreign, due to high levels of illiteracy, non-adaptability of library services to local environment needs, and poor library services in the few rural settings where they do exist.

The study also showed that since PLSLB does not provide relevant information services to the rural inhabitants, its services have no significant impact on them. The study revealed that rural inhabitants in the two LGCs where the outreach libraries are situated are not directly impacted by the library services not to talk of those in other LGCs. Obviously, PLSLB information services cannot have positive impact on the rural inhabitants if such services are not tailored towards them. This is in tune with the position of Abolaji (2009) who stated that non-literate rural dwellers can make effective use of a sophisticated institution like the library, when it is tailored to their own structure of information demand.

Negligence on the part of the government, non-approval of budget, non-release or non-implementation of budget (where approved) which consequently result into lack of funds, extremely dilapidated facilities, obsolete resources and shortage of staff are major challenges hampering PLSLB efforts to making relevant information accessible to the rural inhabitants. This consents to the findings of Ebiwolate (2010) which stated inadequate funding, infrastructure and shortage of

manpower as some of the challenges facing public libraries services to rural areas in Niger Delta States in Nigeria.

In view of the identified challenges, both the PLSLB staff and the rural inhabitants made passionate calls on government, individuals, NGOs and the international community for assistance in the interest of the suffering masses, who need access to information. They also solicited for training opportunities for members of the library staff. This is in line with the recommendations by Ebiwolate (2010) that adequate funds should be made available for the provision of quality library services to the rural population, and that staff should be exposed to continuous training in ICT and related areas.

Conclusion

The case of PLSLB is one among many public libraries' pathetic stories in Nigeria. Its inability to discharge its social responsibilities to the rural dwellers is worrisome. Information needs of the poor rural dwellers are not being met by PLSLB because it is constrained by lack of funds, shortage of staff, lack of political will, extremely dilapidated facilities and obsolete resources. There is therefore a need for urgent intervention to rescue the Library from its present state.

Implications

Obviously, less attention is being given to public libraries by Nigerian Government. The findings of this study justify that the impact of the so many access to information advocacy campaigns at global and regional levels is yet to be felt at the grass root. There is therefore, a need for further research to determine the status quo of other public libraries in Nigeria and other developing countries in Africa and beyond, as it affects access to information by rural inhabitants. The results of such research would guide governments, policy makers, organizations and institutions in their activities towards achieving increased access to information for sustainable development. They will also help to identify areas which need urgent attention.

And Then...The Ways Out

Obviously, PLSLB will deliver excellently in increasing users' and rural inhabitants' access to information if its challenges can be tackled. Following the outcome of this study, the following suggestions are presented as possible ways out of PLSLB predicament:

1. Plateau State Government of Nigeria should give timely response and support to PLSLB especially as it affects funding, since almost all their challenges are based on lack of funds;
2. At least one public library should be situated in each major town in the State, to bring information services closer to the rural people;
3. PLSLB solicits assistance from individuals, organizations and the international community;
4. Members of PLSLB administration should be exposed to trainings on grant application, ICT and financial management;
5. Members of PLSLB administration should continuously demonstrate accountability, transparency and integrity in the handling of resources deployed to the establishment.

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